

Audrey Cooper **Editor-in-Chief, San Francisco Chronicle**

Media Masters – March 29, 2018

Listen to the podcast online, visit www.mediamasters.fm

Welcome to Media Masters, a series of one to one interviews with people at the top of the media game. Today, I'm in the newsroom of the San Francisco Chronicle and joined by their editor-in-chief Audrey Cooper. A graduate of Boston University, Audrey worked as a journalist at the Associated Press before joining the Chronicle as assistant metro editor. She progressed to editor-in-chief, becoming the first woman to hold that position in the paper's history, and the youngest to fill a top post at a national paper in the whole of the US, and has grown the paper's readership to 35 million.

Audrey, thank you for joining me.

Thank you.

Audrey, when you were appointed editor-in-chief, the Chronicle was shedding staff and losing millions. How did you turn it around? Thirty-five million is incredible reach.

Yes, it is an amazing number, and certainly more than ever read the Chronicle in what we called "the good old days". We were at a point about 10 years ago when we were losing about \$1m a week in the newsroom, and we did a lot of things to turn that around. Not the least of which is we made what was a very difficult decision at the time, which was to ask our subscribers to pay more. And of course, the way newspapers had worked for literally hundreds of years before that, all the way back to Joseph Pulitzer and the penny wars, was to give it away for free and then tell advertisers you had this very large base. But advertisers got a lot smarter, and the Internet helped them get a lot smarter, so they quickly understood that just because you paid \$20 because some kid came to your front door and tried to sell you a newspaper subscription, didn't mean you were reading it. And we made a gamble, that now seems very obvious but wasn't at the time, to jack up our subscription prices and our subscribers stayed with us. And that's really important that we did that when we did, because since then we have not had any layoffs and we've actually grown the newsroom. Whereas our competitors, not only in the Bay area but nationwide, have had the exact opposite problem.

Well, frankly, good journalism has to be paid for.

Yes. Yes. It's funny, reporters expect healthcare, and working computers, and to be able to feed their families! It's outrageous, I know, but... no, it's very important. It doesn't come for free, and just because you have a wifi connection doesn't make you a journalist – I think that's important for people to remember.

Where do you want to take the paper next?

Oh, that is an excellent question! I think we have routinely punched way above our weight for what we are. For the last several years we've been named the best newspaper in California, which is, you know, one of the biggest states in the country. And I think what has been most rewarding for our staff, and for me personally, is to double down on our investigative reporting. We added back our investigative team two years ago, and it really has reinvigorated the newsroom. I had a tweet storm at the beginning of 2018, about all the things we uncovered last year and all the things that made the world that we live in safer. And that's the community I want my family to live in, is one where people have a media that's sticking up for their rights and what's best for the community.

It's an incredibly brave thing to do from a commercial point of view, isn't it? Because investigative reporting is very expensive and sometimes can lead into cul-de-sacs where you investigate and it turns out they weren't doing anything wrong at the time.

Yes, I would say probably the most of our investigative reporting has been directed at Pacific Gas and Electric Company, which is the major utility in Northern California. Not only were they responsible for the explosion in San Bruno, where a gas line exploded and people literally burned to death in their living rooms, but they also are increasingly being looked at as the source of our recent Northern California wildfires that killed, I think, were up to 44 people died in those fires. And PG&E has always been one of the Chronicle's number one advertisers, so it's remarkable that we still have independent media where my bosses don't even blink an eye when I say, "We have another story about PG&E doing something wrong," and they don't say, "Oh, man, can we stop messing with this advertiser?" They say, "Great, can't wait to read it."

Proper journalism with old school integrity from the good old days, as you would say.

Yes, and I think that's something that people don't really understand about our industry is that, you know, I did not become a journalist to make more money for the Hearst Corporation, and I guarantee you there is nobody in that newsroom that would say that either. And I don't think there is anyone in the corporation that would say our number one goal is that. Our number one goal is to represent our community to make it safer, and to improve public discourse. It is something that's in the very fabric of what our company does, and part of our culture. And when you look at what's happening in the rest of the world today, the major distributors of news are tech companies, tech platforms, that don't have that as part of their ethos. And I have been called naïve by some, for saying that that is a major problem with how

news is distributed now. Facebook is not interested in whether you're a smarter voter. They do not care. They care how much time you spend on their platform.

The so-called dwell time.

Right. That's all they care about. And I think their recent decisions are emblematic of that. And it's not just Facebook, it's also Twitter, it's Google too, to some extent. These companies that feed off of the distribution of news don't have the same principles that we do, and I think that's important for people to understand.

Yours is an incredible success story, but don't you think journalism is under threat as never before? Not just from clickbait websites, ad blockers and so on, but you've also got a president who is poisoning the well of journalism itself. Everything is "fake news" that doesn't suit him.

Yes... I guess we're a little privileged to be in our San Francisco bubble here. Less than 10% of the city of San Francisco voted for President Trump, so...

You've got him though.

Yes, well, that's true. But I find it actually quite invigorating, because I have never had so many people ask me like, "Audrey, how are you doing? We really support you." Like, that never happened before! So I think in this odd way it's provoked a civic discussion about the value of what we do. And for a long time, my predecessors – not just the Chronicle, but everywhere – I think we didn't do a good enough job about talking about what our value was and promoting it. You know, we don't toot our own horn, and I say, "Screw that! I'm gonna toot it all over San Francisco!" Because it's important that people value what we do, and understand what we do, and make it a priority to engage with what we produce.

When you took over, you said you jacked up the subscriptions. Did that change the nature of your relationship with your readers? Because you were saying to them, "If you value this, you have to literally value it in terms of paying more dollars and cents."

Yes. I mean, if you look at our numbers, obviously the overall paper's circulation went down, which we fully anticipated it would. But we have an extremely loyal subscriber base now that has been pretty flat over the years. Whereas other newspapers, who haven't done this, have just seen it eroded, eroded, erode. So we were really clear with people about why we were doing that. We are in the black now; we don't make a lot of money, it's a pretty thin margin.

You're not making a loss though, which is incredible.

Yes, red ink is bad! They didn't teach me that in journalism school, but it turns out it is an important person. Red ink is bad. So I think as long as we can stay in the black, and we are still producing journalism that our subscribers want, we're in a really good position – and I just wish that there were more journalism companies in the United States that were in similar positions.

What else was top of your to do list when you took over the job as editor-in-chief? Because you mentioned the commitment to investigative journalism, you mentioned changing the nature of your relationship with the subscribers, i.e. asking them to pay more, but I imagine there'll be a lot of other people listening to this podcast that quite want to copy your toolkit of methodologies if they want to turn a paper around. What else did you do?

Well, there are really two things that were at the top of my list. The first was to do a better job in the community talking about what we did and to be more outward facing, and to have a media that San Francisco would be proud of, or at least took some pride in. I don't want you to agree with us all the time, and I don't want you to think the news is happy all the time, I want you to be enraged and emboldened and aggravated and gleeful and everything else when you read the news.

The whole gamut of emotions.

Every emotion I want you to get when you when you read the news, because I think that's healthy. And we need to explain to people that that's our role in the community. And the second thing that was really important was the culture of the newsroom. I'll admit I am a little biased, but I think we have one of the happiest newsrooms in America. Because I expect excellence from this newsroom and I expect them to be okay with change. You know, journalists don't like change very much. We like getting things right, and as such it breeds a conservatism, and I don't mean politically, I mean just that you don't like things to change because if things change you might get something wrong, and that's absolutely the wrong thing to do in this day and age that we live in. And so we needed to increase the ambition of the newsroom, and also make it a change positive, non-toxic place to work. And I won't lie, in the beginning I had a lot of doubt whether I would be successful at that, but I think now you can go out there and everybody will say, "Yeah, at the beginning we weren't so sure about some of these things, but while it actually turned out that it worked."

It was quite a courageous thing to do, because it could have failed. Any genuinely bold decision where are you going to try and effect genuine change, like you have done, has the potential to go wrong. And it could have gone wrong.

I guess so, but when you're losing \$1m a week, what's the alternative? I mean, the alternative is we don't do anything. And I said, on the day I was named editor, that I would not be the last leader of the San Francisco Chronicle, and dammit, I am not going to be the last editor of the Chronicle! There will be many after me, and this newspaper will be around to print my obituary.

Well, we hope that lasts many, many years from now, obviously!

We do, we do!

You obviously won't be reading it unless you've checked it in advance and put it in a vault!

That's an idea...

We could do that. How have you grown the audience to 35 million? That's incredible as well.

Yes, well, that's all of our platforms – our apps, our e-editions, we have two websites – and our paper. It fluctuates between about 30-35, given the news of the month. But we have a really unique situation in that we have a free website – SFGate – and it's very large, and it's a very national website that has, I would say... it's a lot buzzier, there's a little bit more entertainment. There's definitely real news in there, but you'll also find out about celebrities and other things that are just interesting to people. And it's a low barrier of entrance for people.

It's quite upbeat, isn't it? Approachable.

Yes, it's very approachable and I would say it's for people who aren't interested in reading the 10,000-word investigation on something, and that's okay. I think that's good. If you're not interested in reading everything we produce, SFGate is for you. And then we have SFChronicle.com, which is our premium website that is subscriber focused. There's a metered paywall on it, but really we want subscribers to be reading this website. And that's where you get what I call 'Journalism with a capital J'. It's our columnists, our analysis, our investigations. I don't like to use the word 'smarter news', but that's a colloquial way of putting it. They have... and to some extent the audiences overlap, but really they're quite different, and what's very encouraging to me is that the audience on SFChronicle.com is actually younger than the free website, which... I am totally excited about this, and most studies that I've read have suggested that the millennials and younger people know you have to pay for news. It's this older generation where we were giving away newspapers for free and everything, they're the ones that are still very resistant to that. But the next generation, they've gotten the memo. So I think there's a lot of encouraging things. But we have a very diverse amount of products to give people, and we monetise each one of them pretty effectively.

Do you have a typical reader in mind when you when you think of a reader? Do they live in the bay? You mentioned that it is regarded as a national newspaper as well; how does that work in terms of the percentage of people overall that live local to here, and how many people are reading it in Denver and in New York and in Little Rock, Arkansas?

Well, we are a Northern California based newspaper so we're a very regional in what news we choose to go after. Certainly we have a Washington bureau, but we're doing stories out of Washington that are viewed through a California prism. So we probably do more environment based stories, for example, than you might see in the middle of the country where maybe people aren't quite as interested in what happens to the oceans. For example. So we have a lot of readers around the country but they're very interested in the San Francisco point of view of news, which is very tech-focused, which is very progressive, and is a very West Coast way of reading the

news. So my typical reader, if I was to describe it, would be... I call them 'my people', so you're in your mid to late 30s, you maybe just had a kid, you're starting to develop your career, maybe you bought property. These are the people who are developing a civic consciousness, and those are the people that historically newspapers went after to sell newspaper subscriptions to, it's just now they want it delivered to their front porch any more. They want it delivered in a different way. But those are the people that I really want to snare and drag into the Chronicle family.

San Francisco encompasses the wealthy beneficiaries of the tech boom, but there's also a huge homelessness crisis, which I have seen for myself, being here. Do you think it's the Chronicle's job to bridge those two worlds?

Absolutely! I think homelessness is the greatest tragedy of this tech boom, and it certainly was around before tech came to San Francisco too, but the wealth inequality is what I think, 100 years from now, we will look back on this period and say, "How did they not get a grasp on that?" And how the Chronicle has decided to tackle that, I think has been a very innovative approach to media in this day and age, because we organised what we called the San Francisco Homeless Project. We started about two and a half years ago now, but one day I was thinking, "How do we get to this story?" We can't write any more front page stories, like it's just contributing to the noise around homelessness. I thought, "Well, I have a lot of friends who are journalists and I know all the editors, so maybe if I go all the other media around this and we all organised a single day of mass coverage where all you could see were stories about the causes and solutions to homelessness, we could actually make a dent." And I was hoping for like 15 media outlets. On the first day of our coverage we had 83. And it was remarkable. And it was great, because first of all it spurred a lot of change. Politicians can maybe ignore one of us, but they can't ignore all of us. And more importantly, in some ways, I think it gave this community pride around their media. At that time in particular, if you asked what the least respected profession was, we were down there with trial lawyers and cable repair men or something, like, we were way far down there. And I think in San Francisco, if you ask the average person, "What do you think about the Chronicle?" now, they'll say, "Yes, they're totally doing things in a new way," and that homeless project was really the start of it for us.

Cosmopolitan magazine included you in their list of 50 fearless women. Did you take that as a compliment?

(Laughs) Yes! There's a Marissa Mayer quote that I read once that said, "You should go to work every day a little bit scared." And I just loved that quote because it's so true. Nobody talks about that. Like, I'm afraid everyday that is this enough, are we doing the right things. The enormity of the responsibility that we have to preserve fair and independent journalism for this community is a major task. So fearless, I don't think anyone's fearless, but I aspire to be somebody.

Kind of feel the fear and do it anyway.

Yes.

What drew you to San Francisco? Because you're from Kansas originally, is that right?

I am from Kansas. My husband and I went to school on the East Coast and then he got into a PhD program in Berkeley, but I had applied to be an intern at the San Francisco Chronicle every year of college and never got a call back. So when we got into our Geo Metro, which I don't know if you know what a Geo Metro is, but it's the yuckiest car, a tiny little tin can that was teal green, and we drove across the country and we got to San Francisco with like two bags and a giant old TV that was as big as the car itself. And my husband said, "So where do you want to go first?" and I said, "I want to go to fit the mission and see the Chronicle building." And this was probably seven years before I actually weaselled my way into a paying job at The Chronicle. But it was always a place that I wanted to come to.

Did you look at the building and think, "I want to be the editor of that one day."

No! I definitely didn't. No, that never occurred to me. In fact, it didn't occur to me even when I was the number two here for a while. It just seemed like a really... I don't know, that was a job that old people took when you were like, 60, and you got that job. It was a big deal back then. And then our editor retired and I thought, "Oh, well, they'll hire somebody else." And then I kept doing the job, and then I keep doing it, and I'm like, "No, they're going to hire me! So it was something that I got accustomed to more than aspired to, I would say.

And when that moment came that you thought that you were going to do the job, did you like it? did you think, "Wow, I actually do want to do it."

I have the best job in the world! Like, really, this is this is the best job. I can't imagine another job that would be more fun than mine, because I get to live in what I think is the best city in the country. I have a newsroom that is grinding it out every day and happy and doing great work. And it's the best job ever.

What's a typical week like for you?

There is no such thing as a typical week!

Everyone always says that!

I'm so sorry! I'm clichéd already.

The question is clichéd, rather than the answer.

I work between 60 and 100 hours a week.

So you're a part-timer, then.

Yes! I do things pretty half way... so, yes, I work a lot. I get here usually about eight to eight-thirty, and then I've decided to set limits on how many nights or mornings I'll

be away, so I have a maximum of four nights away during the week so I can at least hit bed time for my five-year-old three nights a week.

So structured family time.

I try to, because otherwise I could do things every single night. And I'm so passionate about what I do that I would let myself do that, unfortunately.

So you discipline to take yourself away from it so you can be a mother.

I have to have rules for myself. I'm not somebody who does something in moderation very well. I usually just go crazy unless I have rules, and that includes work and carbs. Like, those two things. I have to have very strict rules for myself!

Me too. Carbs are the greatest thing ever.

They are!

They're the only thing that matters in life, as far as I'm concerned.

That's why I have to say no carbs!

You also hired a cannabis consultant to cover what is now the legal marijuana industry in this state. Through the Green State website. What are they like? Are they just completely stoned out of their heads all the time? Do they miss deadlines?

No, no, no! He is very responsible. I mean, cannabis in California, and in the West Coast in general, is really interesting because I think there are the straight-laced people among us that maybe did it in college and then grew up or didn't have access to it or whatever and didn't really fall into it. On the day that it was voted to be recreationally legal, it's so interesting because I was I was at a kindergarten event, and all the other parents...

Were smoking cannabis.

(Laughs) No! That might have made it more fun though.

It would certainly have made a splash! Kindergarten cannabis.

We have verticals for everything!

Exactly.

No, I was talking to the other kindergarten parents. It's so interesting because these seem people who would talk about their trips to wine country or a Pino or a Cabernet were now talking about cannabis, and it was this new frontier that was suddenly not taboo in San Francisco any more, and I started thinking... we have Wine Spectator,

these amazing verticals that are experts in the wine industry and it seems just natural to me that eventually cannabis will get there too. And how do we become the lifestyle brand for that? You know, it's a lot different than wine because it's still not fully legal, it's not federally legal, so...

You can only pay in cash, can't you?

Yes. There's a lot of banking problems around it. You can't take it across state lines. There's a lot of questions about whether federal agents could crack down here – so far they really haven't, but certainly the attorney general would like it if they did – so it's a lot different than the wine industry in that way. It's a very nascent industry. So whether or not it will be able to sustain the advertiser support for it I think is unclear, but it's another one of those things that if you don't try then you're going to end up 10 years from now thinking, "Gosh, I wish we had seen that coming."

But it's a multifaceted story as well, because its not just the consumers of cannabis, but as you mentioned there is a states rights issue. There's a business and emerging markets issue. You have to cover it from all angles.

Yes. Regulation and even what individuals can do legally in their own house varies from where you live, which city you live in, because it's really a very municipally regulated industry. But so there's a lot to cover there, and now the whole west coast is cannabis legal too. So there's this growing acceptance and awareness of this industry, and it's just really fascinating to watch it stumble along basically.

The Chronicle is branching out now and making documentary films. Where did that come from and what are your hopes for it?

Yes, we did a documentary called Last Man Standing, and it was a feature length documentary that went to about a dozen film festivals around the world, and it told the story of our long term AIDS survivors. So AIDS in San Francisco killed, at the height of the epidemic, one out of every 40 people. One out of every 40 people in the city died of AIDS. It's just a remarkable statistic.

You almost can't get your head around it.

I mean, I cant even... I was just a baby when this happened, but I can't even imagine the scars that that left on the city at the time. Bus drivers driving around with masks on, because you didn't know how this disease was transferred. And what happened to a lot of people who got AIDS is they saw all their friends dying very rapidly after acquiring it. And it was a death sentence. You were told like, "You have AIDS, you're going to die." So what would you do if you were told you were going to die? You would probably not go to work every day, you probably would not go to school any more, you wouldn't have long term relationships in the same way. So these people dropped out of society, and some of them survived – and now, because we have prep and we have so many testing things and people know about it, it's largely an elderly person's disease now. So we did the story about what happens when you live your whole life waiting to die, and you don't. And it's a very troubling story. So to accompany the written piece and the photos, we also did a feature length

documentary. And to me, it was a very exciting thing for us to do because it showed we aren't just newspaper people; we have something to say about our community, and we can say it on a number of different platforms. And I guarantee you the thousands of people who saw that film never read the piece that we did in print. And so we reached totally new people with this, which I think is really exciting as a journalist.

It's interesting that you mention that, because I was thinking about San Francisco as an area, as a town. I know it's easy said that a lot of towns are unique, but San Francisco seems to be the most unique in the whole of the US.

We're super weird!

It's just an amazing one-off, and that must feed into your coverage of the Bay Area and your journalism.

Yes. Well, I will bore you with a brief history lesson, but San Francisco in the years before the gold rush, just five years before the gold rush, there were 350 people living in the city, or 400. The Gold Rush happens, gold is discovered in 1848, and in 1849, when the Gold Rush is really at it's heyday, 25,000 people migrate to San Francisco. It's the largest peace time migration of people still in world history. So if you think about what happens to a city when it goes from nothing to , "Holy cow, we're a metropolis and a financial centre of the West Coast," overnight, and frankly, with mostly men, young men, who came to earn their millions. Now, first of all, I don't need to point out the parallels to the time we live in now, with all the tech pros coming to San Francisco to earn their millions, but it got a reputation from the very beginning as a very bawdy and naughty sort of town where everything goes, and it was diverse right off the bat too. So most cities grow from like village to town to... you know, they have this slow growth; San Francisco was a boom right off the bat. And it's a self-fulfilling prophecy that still holds true today: you don't come here unless you're okay with some of the quirkiest parts of San Francisco. If you're not okay with our quirkiness we have some very nice suburbs for you to live in.

But other towns are available.

Other towns are available! But like what I like to say about San Francisco is that we are intolerant of intolerance. Unless you're a Trump fan, in which case they might be a little more intolerant of you! But yes, a lot of anything goes in the city.

You've said that you were committed to... I was about to say, reading your own obituary, but I didn't mean that, the obituary being in the paper after you've gone, and therefore continuing. What advice would you give to someone starting out their journalism career that wants to be the next editor of The Chronicle?

Oh, man! That would make me so happy. I wish more people wanted my job, to be honest with you! I think journalism right now is such an interesting time for young people. The worries that I have is that they are so excited about – glamour isn't quite right – but the power and the influence you can have, and they forget about the

basics of why they're doing it. And to give the story right, and to realise the incredible power you have over people's lives. You can ruin somebody's life, or definitely make a very bad part of their history by getting something wrong, or even getting something right in choosing to print it. So I think the power and the responsibility here is sometimes lost on the newer generation that just gets very excited about what they're doing instead of why they're doing it.

And do you think there will always be the same amount of people in each generation that have that curiosity and that dedication to change, or do you think that things are changing generationally that people are getting side-tracked by the spectacle of clickbait and the apps and forgetting the reason why they doing it?

I think there are always going to be true believers. Whether or not they're cynical enough to become journalists I sometimes worry about, but that might just be me getting older and grouchier. I mean, there is a certain amount of scepticism that you have to bring to everything, and whenever people say, "Who do you like for Mayor?" I say, "I dislike them all equally." And I like them all equally. Like, that's not my job. My job is to give you, the voter, information about what they stand for and what they've done and what they likely will do so that you can make an informed decision.

Is there something about the character of what I would call a proper journalist, what you're talking about there, that they are cynical but in the best possible sense, that it's born of a sense of justice and a sense of sunlight being the best disinfectant holding people to account.

You see, you're talking about the character of a journalist and I thought you were going to go to the drinking!

Someone once described themselves as an optimistic fatalist.

Oh! Yes. I guess so. It's funny, the longer I do this the more faith I have in humanity, strangely enough, because you see how bad things can get, and how many people work to fix it, and how good most people are. Most people are not corrupt. Every time I say that on a panel of political consultants they'll look at me like I'm crazy, but I really do believe most people want to make the world a better place. Now, maybe some of us want to work harder at it than others, but I do believe that, and I do believe also that when people act badly, whether it's massive corruption that kicks people out of their homes, or causes pipelines to explode, or fires to break out, or even just people acting badly on the street, whatever that is in that spectrum we have a responsibility to call it out because we all live here together and that shouldn't happen.

Does it frustrate you though that there seems to be an increasing polarity in society these days? Certainly in the UK where I am from, and here in America, it is almost expressed by the two competing news feeds that people have in Facebook. There's the Trump supporter that have all these conspiracy theories and their way of looking at them, and then there's the Obama and the Hillary

Clinton supporters and they look at things completely differently, and almost self-censor now. The two news feeds are so different from one another that it seems almost irreconcilable.

Well, this is part of my criticism about the motivations of the tech companies that are allowing that to happen. Like, never mind the fake news that they're allowing to cheaply promote and spread, the Twitter bots that Twitter still seems to be reluctant to crack down on. So yes, but I think this country has always been polarised, it just hasn't been quite as obvious that we are as polarised. What bothers me a little bit more is the seeming lack of ideology that we have nowadays. Like, I was raised one of the reddest parts of Kansas, and people there would not have very much in common with your modern day San Franciscan. But they did have a consistent way of viewing the world. And now, I think people are generally inconsistent about the prism through which they view politics; it's a lot more self-serving and a rush to judgment and it's not fully informed. And one of my favourite things to tell audiences where I speak is, "I fervently believe you do not have the right to an uninformed opinion." And most people's opinions are uninformed. And until we get to a point where people are willing to realise that, I really fear for our democracy.

As you were saying that, I was thinking about the philosopher Bertrand Russell, because he said the problem with the world is that the unintelligent are cocksure whereas the intelligent are full of doubt.

So true. I think a lot of people are very intellectually lazy nowadays, and you also see, even when we print a controversial opinion piece online or in print and people say, "How dare you print that!" I think, "It's just idiots. Calm down everybody." Like, why are you so upset? We didn't say you had to agree with it. But how do you possibly know what you think unless you understand the other side? I just don't understand that at all. Like, how can you be okay with forming an opinion like that?

It seems to be a rush to be offended as well. I read a lot of op-eds, and even the ones that I vehemently disagree with I enjoy reading it, because if my arguments are strong enough in my own mind then they ought to be tested against the opposing side.

Yes. I totally agree. I think it's a lack of intellectual curiosity that we have. And I also think that people are very afraid of giving even a little bit of light to anything that they could see becoming racist, or offensive, to groups of people who are struggling. I think that's a real fear. If we were to just take it out of modern day times and go back to like, you know, the rise of the Nazis, should those ideas have been accepted into political discourse? Because they were and then look what happened. But shutting them down nowadays seems very counterproductive too, so I think we have to have more faith in ourselves that we can entertain ideas without becoming the worst of ourselves.

It's very difficult when you have a global tech company. For example, we had executive Matt Brittain on recently from Google, and he was saying that he's responsible for Google in Europe, the Middle East and Africa, and say Holocaust denial, whilst it's incredibly unpleasant to say the least, and

factually wrong, there's the First Amendment here, and in the UK we have freedom of speech, but Holocaust denial in France and Germany is a criminal offence.

Yes. That's so interesting. The different media policies of European countries I just absolutely interesting, and you know better than anyone the rise that gives to different media cultures throughout the world. I just think I couldn't live in a place where you couldn't say something that's even repugnant. Like I said, maybe I'm a – what did you call it, an optimistic fatalist? – maybe that's what I am, but I just believe that people who have crazy ideas, if we really prosecute them in a fair way, will be exposed as having crazy ideas.

Last couple of questions then, because I'm aware you incredibly busy, and thank you for making the time, by the way. Do you enjoy your time as editor as opposed to being a journalist? Now, some people disagree with the premise of the question itself and say that they're the same job, but do you think of yourself as an editor now? Do you edit other people's work? Are you involved in like, management meetings and HR and things like that, or do you still make time to write and like check copy? What is what is your actual job?

What do you DO all day?! It's funny, we use Slack as an internal communication.

We do as well. It's both saved and ruined our lives.

Exactly! And it has like, who are you, under it, and mine says, "I go to meetings so you don't have to." And I do think there's some truth to that. I was a good editor, and I was a good reporter, but I was the best there ever was, and I think I could be the best there ever was as an editor, because one of my favourite things to do is translating in the newsroom's interest, desires and needs to people who are not journalists, and not very many people want to do that or can do it very well, and it's really important from the newsroom to have an advocate who can do that, both internally to the company but externally as well. I do still edit certainly our major projects; none of our big stuff goes in without me going through with a fine tooth comb. But I'm not, on a day to day basis, elbow deep in copy at six o'clock at night. I've got lots of other things to do, and more importantly I have a editors who are very good at doing that, and I trust them implicitly.

So is that their main job, then, as the as leader of this business in a sense? Is it to hire the right people and create the right culture?

Oh, absolutely. Hiring people is... I'd like to say that one of my superpowers is hiring people, because a few bad hires and things go south very quickly. This is a small family and you get a couple of crazy cousins in it and it just ruins Thanksgiving, you know? It really is that way.

Always got to count the fingers and toes.

Exactly.

No mutants in the newsroom.

Yes, but a couple of really amazing hires change it for the better too. So I have the ability to hire, probably since I became editor, about 80 people. And I would say, with the exception of like, one or two people, they have all been extraordinary journalists and have really helped transform the culture of the newsroom.

But what's your secret sauce there? Because everyone interviews well.

Oh, I don't think that's true at all! Oh, no. Not at all. I'm a really hard interviewer. Anyone who's listening to this should know that it is intimidating to come in...

Luckily I'm interviewing you!

Are you looking for a job?

Maybe one day!

Maybe one day. It's a small world. No, I don't think people interview well at all, and what I am looking for is, first of all, no jerks. I do not do drama, lazy or stupid. Because I really think those three things you cannot fix, and luckily not very many stupid people come through. We don't have that problem. Lazy, you can generally suss out from people you know, or their body of work, and toxic I think you can tell right off the bat too – I have a sixth sense for that. And those people... we've had some journalists who have been incredibly genius investigative journalists, genius, and just complete jerks. And I don't care how talented you are, but if you're a jerk you're not going to work here.

Then I've got no chance! Thank you for the heads up. Now I don't have to bother with my application.

Just so you know!

Last question, then. This is a bit weird, because we've dwelled on your obituary a few times.

You're making me feel like I should go to the doctor or something!

So decades upon decades from now, what do you want to be in it? What would you say will be your achievements and where will you say you fell down?

Oh, that's so interesting! Well, I think it would say that I could be probably a polarising force, because as you can probably tell, I'm a little opinionated and very forceful about what I think we need to do. And not everybody digs that, which is okay. I try to be a nice person.

I'm the same. There are people who like me, and people who are wrong.

Yes! (Laughs) I like that! I'm going to use that. And I hope it says, "She became editor at a key time and helped preserve an institution on the cusp of its 150th birthday for the next 150 years."

Well, Audrey, let there be another 150 years after that.

Amen!

Thank you ever so much for your time, it's been hugely enjoyable.

Thank you.